

THE JOHNSON DOCTRINE

The foreign policy of a President with 'the ego of Goliath and the caginess of David'

By Alistair Cooke

LYNDON B. JOHNSON AND THE WORLD. By Philip Geyelin. Frederick A. Praeger. 309 pp. \$5.95.

Given the grandiosity of the man, it was probably inevitable that when Lyndon Johnson came to the Presidency he should try to overcompensate for the general view that he would be inept at foreign policy. The memory of the Texas yell let off in the Taj Mahal was very green and made Nehru wince whenever he thought of it. The remembered search for an acceptable bed to accommodate the Texas Ranger still depresses the protocol boys in Athens. The Thais are too tactful to recall the shuddering episode when Big Brother jumped into a Siamese crowd and shook hands all round with a people almost as averse to this form of physical contact as was George Washington.

Mr. Geyelin does not flinch before these exuberances of a man who up to then had been known to refer to the new nations of Africa and Asia as "growing suburbs." Nor does he skimp the more objective evidence that in the House LBJ's closest contact with foreign affairs was on the Naval Affairs Committee, that in the Senate he was absorbed by the Military Preparedness Subcommittee and was the thrifty bookkeeper of the Appropriations Subcommittee of the State Department. Because of this apparently inadequate background, his instinctive approach to the suppliants of Africa or the Middle East, and to the threats and alarms out of Russia and China, was to demand more self-help from America's friends and a bigger bang for a buck against America's enemies.

The notion is still held by people who should know better that he was a first-class Congressional strategist who thought of Germany and Mexico as governments-in-exile out of Fredericksburg and Del Rio, Texas. This overlooks his long familiarity with Space matters, his well-fulfilled duty both as Minority and Majority Leader to scan every foreign policy measure that came before three Congresses, and his participation in all the crucial negotiations about the Bay of Pigs and Khrushchev's retrieval of the Cuban missiles.

But because of Kennedy's more confident preoccupation with foreign policy, and the dangerous proclamation of himself (in that eloquent but meaningless Inaugural) as the first secular pope in the holy war against Communism, LBJ was the victim of an odious comparison and came in under a cloud of prejudice almost as ponderous as that which, in April, 1945, cast a pall over Harry S Truman, the "failed haberdasher" who had just succeeded Alexander The Great. What more tempting to a President with the ego of Goliath and the caginess of David than to be the giant and the little guy at one and the same time, to stand in for the weak and yet threaten to beat the brains out of the strong? The Johnson Doctrine was never proclaimed as such, but it should be clear by now that by constant repetition in Billy Graham-type sermons, it is in effect. To the American people, it evidently (from the evidence of the polls) signifies a weary but necessary crusade to rid the world of the pestilential nuisance of Communism. To the rest of the world, as anyone who has traveled becomes stupefyingly aware, it is a wild, if unconscious, adventure in colonialism. The Johnson Doctrine is certainly more daring than Truman's and more embracing than Eisenhower's. The President has taken all the (Continued on page 10)

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Book Review Section

The Johnson doctrine

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under-developed world under his wing; and if the Russians or the Chinese press the button anywhere at all, he has given them to understand, like the British in a similarly self-deluding period seventy years ago, that

"We don't want to fight but, by Jingo, if we do, We've got the men, we've got the guns, we've got the money too."

It is at least arguable that while Kennedy believed in NATO and accepted CENTO and SEATO as praiseworthy graduate-school theses to which he was pleased to give his blessing and file away for future revision, LBJ has come to believe in the lot. On his extrovert level, he has undertaken to defend 46 foreign countries. On the level of his Texas realism, he must know it cannot work.

The present administration conflict in American foreign policy, which is livelier than the Western allies know, stems from the President's itch for drama and his instinct for compromise.

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That is what Mr. Geyelin's book is about. It is a detailed and patient file on the process, or accident, of our involvement in everything from Panama and Brazil to trade with the Eastern satellites; from the Multilateral Force to Santo Domingo and Viet Nam, ("the orphan war"). In spite of its melange of documents, gossip, and dates that sometimes passes for a foreign policy analysis, it is not possible to doubt after reading it that if there is one man in America who tastes every pie and re-vamps every foreign recipe, that man is none other than our ingenious, commanding, and deeply frustrated Leader. Mr. Geyelin has done a service to the lay reader, and to the people in State and the Pentagon who believe that foreign policy is either a wad of *aides-memoires* or an audit of "hardware," by writing an absorbing and consecutive record of the events that naturally followed from the mid-century status of the United States as well as the events that followed from the shifts and turns of the President's character. In almost every contretemps, whether with de Gaulle or Ayub Khan, and in every foreign re-

bellion, he is seen as a man "impelled . . . towards crowd-pleasing heroics" and in the same moment a man "warned away from anything that might cause him to fall on his face"; a President seeking "to choose between what was desirable and what was achievable, [between] what would be scintillating and what would be safe." Mr. Geyelin is particularly thorough, and alarmingly convincing, in his long account of the slow, irresistible slump into the Viet Nam policy; of the U Thant negotiations that came to nothing; of the perhaps fatal loss (after the symbolic destruction of the B-57 bombers at Bien Hoa) of an initiative, by retaliation, that might have given "the Communists serious pause and thus perhaps have hastened the day when both sides would have been ready—simultaneously—to reduce the level of hostilities or even to negotiate."

It can be held, and would be by many a first-class diplomat, that foreign policy towards any given country is at its best when we don't know what it is, the implication being that only rough seas are dangerous. This was the theory and practice of the British Foreign Office in the latter half of the 19th century. But a great deal of work was going on underneath. It did not need to be known about (and, true, in those days the public did not ask to know) because

most Britons assumed, correctly, that any threat to the security of the British Isles and the Empire, or to the equipoise of the European powers on the continent, would be taken care of by the British Navy.

It may be that the great defect of the present American foreign policy is attributable to the character of Lyndon Johnson only to the extent that his temperament aggravates it. The fundamental defect is the lack of an effective punitive reserve somewhere between the guerrilla patrol and the Bomb. The same may be said of the Russians. The only two great powers of the earth glare at each other across the melting ice of the Cold War in ironic impotence. Their power is based in the possession of nuclear weapons. Yet they cannot—unlike the British with their Navy, the ultimate weapon of that time—use it. The moral taboo that set in with Hiroshima, and which it has been the telling function of the United Nations General Assembly to advertise and enforce, is so strong that while it promises at least a long delay in the oncoming of the nuclear holocaust, it leaves each side powerless to impose either a Pax Sovietica or a Pax Americana. The Americans can't stop the burning of their embassies in Cairo or Jakarta, and the Russians must ignore the shooting of Nkrumah's Russian guard

when the moment arrived for ousting him. In Viet Nam, we are reduced to using napalm against civilians and portable radar against guerrilla fighters who have the mobility of ants and who prepare, with their underground workshops, for a 10 or 20 year war.

This frustration encourages bluster, like that of the late Mr. Vyshinsky threatening prodigies of retribution if the United States went too far; like the empty grandeur of Mr. Dulles' pledge to contain a whole world system; and now, the enlargement of this vow, by President Johnson, to root out Communism in any of the 40-odd countries where political turbulence might seem to encourage its introduction. The high price of bluster has already been proved to America's dismay, by the heavy raids Viet Nam has compelled the Defense Department to make on stocks of supplies, weapons, and trained reserves of men; and should Peking or Moscow raise the dust in two or three other countries—or, worse, become reconciled—it might be proved to the nation's actual peril. If American foreign policy is what the President says it is, the United States is committed to a protective patrol so far beyond the measured policeman's tread of the British Empire at the peak of its power as to boggle the imagination and bankrupt the Republic. ❧